

# The Politics of Empiricism

## *Research Recommendations of the Joint Commission on Mental Health of Children*

NORMAN H. HAMM *University of Nebraska at Omaha*<sup>1</sup>

The final report of the Joint Commission on Mental Health of Children (1970) is a provocative social mandate for America's children, calling for a general reorganization of the child mental health enterprise around *prevention* rather than the traditional *treatment* of mental disorders once they occur. Accordingly, a fourfold approach is forcefully presented: (a) the development and implementation of a child advocacy system; (b) a comprehensive health, support, and remedial care system for children, particularly for the socially disadvantaged; (c) expanded, individually based, applied and basic research on child mental health; and (d) new approaches to the development of mental health manpower. Additional chapter summaries deal with aspects of poverty, racism, employment, education, and the relation of these aspects to child mental health.

While the four general recommendations are obviously interrelated and difficult to separate, this article will critically examine the efficacy, training, and administration of research in terms of meeting the goal of children's mental health.

The author's method is limited, if not indeed somewhat paradoxical. What is offered is a *rational analysis* of our empirical enterprise as it applies to practical payoff, especially mental health. What surely is needed is a science of science (not to be confused with a philosophy of science), or research performed on research policy; however, in the profound absence of such knowledge, one can only guess and offer hypotheses about which principles will produce the most scientific progress.

### *The Efficacy of Research on Child Mental Health*

Although the report places no monetary value on any of its recommendations, research is one of the four major areas with which it deals. The Commission recommends increased support of both pure and applied research together with the establishment of 10 child mental health research centers under the auspices of the National Institute of Mental Health or the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Such a conceptual, if not monetary, acknowledgment presumes that scientific research can have a major impact on children's mental health. Such an assumption is clearly an important one, particularly for a preventive approach to mental health.

An analysis of presumed research payoff has two levels, one fairly simple and the other quite complex. Regarding the former, adequate evidence already exists regarding the variables, particularly early experiences, that greatly influence mental health. At the present time, a psychological prescription could be written during childhood which would minimize the causes of mental illness later in life. Knowledge of proper environmental dosages may not be as exact as in the practice of internal medicine, but they nevertheless exist. Additional research of the type recommended in the Commission's report would undoubtedly add greatly to the precision of mental health prescription.

The assumption becomes inexorably complex when consideration is given to whether society will use such information in a preventive manner. While the actual choice of therapeutic procedures may be made on a personal moral basis instead of an empirical one (see Baer, 1970; Johnston, 1972; Solomon, 1964), mental health practitioners would probably implement new knowledge as it becomes available. Their professional consciences would

---

<sup>1</sup> Requests for reprints should be sent to Norman H. Hamm, Department of Psychology, University of Nebraska, P.O. Box 688, Omaha, Nebraska 68101.

probably dictate change. In the case of the lay public, however, knowledge concerning mental health may continue to be largely unused. The question is whether the public will use the results of sound behavioral research.

Some evidence exists on both sides. Many influential individuals, including the Vice-President of the United States, have deplored the creeping influence of the behavioral scientist and engineer into contemporary life. The loss of autonomy, resistance to a deterministic view of life, and the increasing predictability of behavior do not appeal to large segments of the lay public. In addition, the argument commonly used against B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two* concerns the totalitarian organization of the community, with behavioral engineers, instead of politicians, on the top of the social pyramid.

If the prescription for child mental health were written on the national level, it is somewhat doubtful whether a substantial number of parents would follow it. The real negative consequences of inadequate child rearing have little impact on the family until adolescence and adulthood. Moreover, a substantial number of parents are emotionally incapable of providing the nurturance necessary for the mental health of their children. They have too many of their own problems with which to contend.

Nevertheless, there is some reason for optimism. The strategy of childhood prevention made possible by increased research has the potential of largely eliminating our generally nonproductive psychiatric population. The logic is appealing, if not the actual dollar consequences.

Some signs point to the increasing social usage of research findings. The recent social legislation concerning the advertising of cigarettes and also the limiting of violence in children's cartoons demonstrate that some social action is already possible; both involved substantial policy changes based on the findings of scientific research, the former from medicine and the latter from psychology. Not all research results may be translated into governmental policy, however. It is likely that the results of empirical research will have little social impact when they conflict with social taboos such as the recent report of the Commission on Sex and Pornography. The scientific evidence unfortunately conflicted with society's prejudices.

The willingness of the public to support and use the information gathered by extensive and expensive research on child mental health has yet to be

firmly established. Before larger sums of money are spent on research, the public must be consulted. After all, it is the taxpayer who must pay the price, while we professionals earn our keep. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to be objective. As a profession, we must guard against the tendency to impose our cherished values on the nonprofessional public. It may be hoped that the advocacy portion of the Commission's recommendations will effectively present the case for children's rights and mental health. Once these rights are accepted by society, then professionals can duly serve as the technical experts necessary to meet their implementation.

### *Research Policy and Administration*

After the absolute amount of dollars is assigned to research concerned with human development, important questions arise concerning research policy and implementation. The overall question is which set of policies offers the most preventive payoff. On this point the Commission takes a strong, but disappointingly, traditional stand.

Except for the recommendation concerning the establishment of 10 child mental health research centers throughout the country, most of the Commission's recommendations support the research status quo. Briefly, both basic and applied research are necessary and should be increased; policy should maximize the "opportunities" and "productivity" of the individual researcher, especially as related to the university's role in basic research; appropriately designed applied research should be increased to assess social action programs; multidisciplinary collaboration is encouraged; and NIMH should sponsor, under its Clearinghouse function, more adequate information retrieval and dissemination to professionals. The last recommendation has been noted by others (Etzioni, 1972), and the Interagency Panel of Early Childhood Research, established in 1970, has begun to coordinate child development research of nine agencies under the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. A similar interagency panel is being established for adolescence.

Below the level of policy, topical priority is given by the Commission to longitudinal, multivariate, life-span studies of human development, methodological research on child development and mental health, and specific studies dealing with early infantile autism, childhood schizophrenia, the natural

history of emotional disturbance, and the effectiveness of various intervention procedures on mental illness, institutionalization, and drug use. The latter studies are to be conducted in the 10 child mental health research centers.

Obviously, there is much that is right about the research policies and specific study areas recommended by the Commission. The specific study areas in particular are soundly conceived; they represent significant problem areas related to child mental health, and the methodological issues raised are premised on developmental research performed in the last several decades. At the principle level, however, the Commission does not go far enough in redirecting our national research policy.

The basic problem with current research administration is *accountability*. Increasingly, in recent years, I have become disenchanted with *individually* sponsored research within *university settings*. Several recent writers have noted the basic incompatibility between university settings and mission-oriented, interdisciplinary research (Harris, 1968; McElroy, 1971; Piel, 1969). While I have every reason not to be an iconoclast, speaking as a former graduate research assistant, predoctoral research fellow, and principal investigator myself, I feel compelled to kill the goose that laid the golden egg.

It is not that scholars should divest themselves of scholarship, but that governmental research institutes, either on or separate from university settings, might be scientifically more productive. The primary problem is that professors and students can be only part-time researchers. They both have other important duties. Professors have teaching, university administration, and community service to tend to, while maze-running, hurdle-jumping graduate students must give considerable (if not full) attention to their academic standing.

The counterargument is often posed that research activities complement and overlap professors' and students' other duties. This argument rings in the hallowed halls of academia today. The overlap, however, is imperfect, and no matter how talented the individuals, their nonresearch responsibilities can only subtract from the time available for the generation of new knowledge. It is still only in the providence of the renaissance man to make substantial contributions to all four areas: research, university administration, community service, and teaching.

The administratively wasteful policy of supporting part-time researchers is undoubtedly reflected in any cost-productivity analysis. To be sure, scientific research would be expensive under any set of policies. However, my experience indicates that the cost per published study is substantially increased by funding projects to individual, part-time researchers. Perhaps science cannot be conceived in terms of a cost-productivity analysis; indeed, some studies take considerable thought and time for execution and may significantly contribute to knowledge, but the business world should afford such extravagance! There are too many videotape recorders, slide projectors, research trailers, and voice keys accumulated by part-time researchers, which are used for few days or months a year—mine included.

Nothing short of drastic action is needed. In this regard, the advantages of centralization and full-time researchers recommend the European model of university- or non-university-related technical institutes. Certain of these institutes, like the 10 child mental health research centers recommended by the Commission, would deal with specific problem areas. Most would be mission oriented. All employees would be full time, but in recognition of the intimate relationship between higher education and research, a certain percentage would rotate between academia and the institutes. Instead of profit as a product, numbers of published articles, coupled with their scientific significance, would be given administrative consideration. Reinforcers such as salary, promotion, and administrative positions, would be contingent on the scientist's actual accomplishments. Finally, equipment usage would be recorded and policies of equipment sharing established among institutes, particularly regarding the most expensive pieces of apparatus.

In short, the present author would like to go beyond the recommendation of 10 child mental health research centers and substantially cut back on individually funded grants to mainly university personnel. The research dollar would likely be lengthened by the European technical institute concept together with accountable administrative procedures which reward individual scientists for productivity. In the end, however, an emerging body of empirical data concerning the efficacy of various research policies should buttress the administrative procedures of government agencies. What is needed is a science of science.

## *Research and the Professional Practitioner*

As a former half-time exile from experimental child psychology, doing applied research for a social action agency within a university setting, I have lived in Cronbach's (1957) divided world of experimental and applied psychology. The internal dissonance produced by this schism might have produced some satisfying personal growth and interesting soliloquies, if the immediate emotional consequences of frustration and conflict could have been removed. My experiences have been totally politicizing.

Despite Cronbach's careful documentation, it is my belief that the schism in psychology exists today, but for a deeper reason. Cronbach's claim is that the research procedures used by experimentalists differ substantially from those employed by practitioners; the experimentalists stress the mean, group homogeneity, and analysis of variance, while the correlationists rely on the standard deviation, group heterogeneity, and factor analysis. Both, however, base the acquisition of new knowledge on scientific empiricism.

The conflict between pure and applied social science is simpler and more general: It is an epistemological conflict that profoundly affects both the professional practice and interpersonal relations of the applied scientist. At the expense of alienating my philosopher colleagues, in practice there are essentially two ways of knowing: *rationalism* and *empiricism*. Experience has taught me that mental health practitioners frequently rely on the former, while experimentalists rely on the latter method of knowing. In some cases, the applied practitioner's rational method may even lead to a reliance on intuition; the constraint of dissonance among internal elements is thereby removed. In short, the conflict between experimental and applied psychology is not so much between different research tools, but whether empiricism or rationalism is supreme as a way of knowing. Psychology is a science, while applied psychology is at best part science and part art. When the practitioner does rely on empiricism he adopts the research tools outlined by Cronbach.

There is a practical advantage to empiricism which totally transcends its epistemological nature: A reliance on empiricism minimizes the potential for individual and professional conflict in applied, particularly social action, settings. The reason for this is that it provides all professionals with an

objective means of evaluating the effectiveness of various policies, individuals, or programs. Evaluation is thereby taken out of the personal-political realm, and the emphasis is placed on the subject.

The consequences of an antiresearch bias on the part of practitioners are often tragic. With no objective means available for evaluation, many decisions regarding policy, individuals, or programs polarize the professional group and shift attention away from the children, placing it on staff relations. Staff morale sinks, work anxiety increases, certain key individuals resign, and the intervention program is doomed to failure. I have seen the pattern countless times and watched our valuable tax money wasted. An empirical orientation on the part of practitioners would not be a complete panacea, but the level of interaction among different professionals would undoubtedly be raised. The other alternative is to all become politicians.

The frequent reliance on rationalism by practitioners largely represents a failure of our professional training institutions. Students undoubtedly learn values along with their education. Many professional schools have either dropped or lessened their research requirements. If students have had adequate research training, they soon forget their research knowledge and retain only the skills that are used day to day. We need to not only bolster the research component of graduate education, but provide continued in-service training after graduation. Ideally, as recommended by the Commission, the professional staff should be continually involved in applied research and program evaluation. At the present time, huge sums of money are spent on social action with little knowledge concerning the effectiveness of the dollars budgeted.

A final note might be made of the Commission's child advocacy system, composed of neighborhood child development councils, local child development authorities, state-level child development agencies, and a national-level advisory council on children. This new consumer-professional coalition brings power to the people, involves nonprofessionals in child health programs, and, in general, increases the public's awareness of child mental health problems. This last factor in particular may do much to overcome the indifference toward child mental health noted in the first section. However, the dollar cost of such persuasion would be either prohibitive or better spent on the other recommendations concerning manpower training and child services.

## *The Future*

In the end, it is hoped that changes in certain administrative procedures will do much to make up for America's decreased investment in research. During the early 1960s, America's expenditure for basic science increased by an impressive 16.2% per year (McElroy, 1971). However, the most recent federal growth rate is not large enough to even offset inflation.

Change is underway today. A research task force of the National Institute of Mental Health is engaged in a massive one-year review of the Institute's science activities. Ten study groups, composed of the Institute's major research interests, have been established. It is hoped that they will be successful in one of their principal objectives, the development of optimal administrative and organizational arrangements. What is needed is a coordinated program of research like that recently proposed for the environment (see Bowers, Hohenberg, Likens, Lynn, Nelkin, & Nelkin, 1971). As noted by McElroy (1971) and here, research policy, in all likelihood, will become more centralized,

mission oriented, interdisciplinary, and perhaps less university centered.

## REFERENCES

- BAER, D. M. A case for the selective reinforcement of punishment. In C. Newringer & J. L. Michael (Eds.), *Behavior modification in clinical psychology*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970.
- BOWERS, R., HOHENBERG, P., LICKENS, G., LYNN, W., NELKIN, D., & NELKIN, M. A program to coordinate environmental research. *American Scientist*, 1971, 59, 183-187.
- CRONBACH, L. J. The two disciplines of scientific psychology. *American Psychologist*, 1957, 12, 671-684.
- ETZIONI, E. Who should ultimately own the data? *Science*, 1972, 176, 121.
- HARRIS, M. The paradox of science in the universities. *Science*, 1968, 161, 223.
- JOHNSTON, J. M. Punishment of human behavior. *American Psychologist*, 1972, 27, 1033-1054.
- JOINT COMMISSION ON MENTAL HEALTH OF CHILDREN. *Crisis in child mental health: Challenge for the 1970's*. New York: Harper & Row, 1970.
- MCElROY, W. D. The role of fundamental research in an advanced society. *American Scientist*, 1971, 59, 294-297.
- PIEL, G. Support of science on the university's own terms. *Science*, 1969, 166, 1101.
- SOLOMON, R. L. Punishment. *American Psychologist*, 1964, 19, 239-253.

## Editorship Nomination

The APA Publications and Communications Board invites nominations for the editorship of the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* for the term running 1976 through 1981. In order to provide a year of overlap with incumbent Ralph Berdie in 1975, the Board will appoint an editor-elect this year. Members wishing to suggest candidates should prepare a brief statement of one page or less in support of each nomination and mail no later than March 1, 1974, to Anita DeVivo, Executive Editor, APA Journals, 1200 Seventeenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.